

# Following the Way of the Ancient Kings: The Concept of “Learning” in the Teachings of Ogyū Sorai

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## Abstract

Ogyū Sorai conceptualizes “learning” as the study of the way of the ancient kings. The way thus represents the rites, music, penal laws and administrative systems which the ancient kings established. Making faith in the sages the foundation of learning, Sorai designates the ancient kings as intermediaries between the ordering activity of heaven and human society. This article tries to examine some of the implications of such a conceptualization, both for the proposed system of social organization as well as for Sorai’s own project of elucidating the way.

**Keywords:** Ogyū Sorai, Tokugawa Confucianism, learning, way of the ancient kings, sages

## Sledenje poti kitajskih prakraljev: koncept »učenja« v poučevanju Ogyū Soraija

### Izvleček

Ogyū Sorai »učenje« pojmuje kot preučevanje poti kitajskih prakraljev. Pot predstavljajo obredje, glasba, kazenski zakonik in administrativni sistemi, ki so jih zasnovali prakralji. S tem, ko zaupanje oziroma vero v prakralje postavi za temelj učenja, Sorai prakralje določi za posrednike med urejevalno dejavnostjo neba in človeško družbo. Članek poskuša pokazati nekatere posledice takšnega pojmovanja tako za predlagani sistem družbene organizacije kot za Soraijev lastni projekt razjasnitve poti.

**Ključne besede:** Ogyū Sorai, konfucijanstvo v obdobju Tokugawa, učenje, pot prakraljev, svetniki

## Introduction

Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728) is considered one of the most influential Japanese thinkers of the Edo period (1603–1868) and a sharp critic of Zhu Xi’s School of Structural Principle. His central works are the two philosophical dictionaries—the

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*Bendō* 弁道<sup>1</sup> and the *Benmei* 弁名<sup>2</sup>—in which he systematically discusses a wide variety of classical Confucian concepts: chief among which is the way of the ancient kings (*sennō no michi*, 先王之道). This article tries to examine Sorai's project based on his concept of "learning" (*xue/gaku* 学)—firstly from the perspective of the proposed subject, methodology and goals; and secondly by taking a closer look at some of its ideological and political implications.

Sorai promotes the study of the ancient kings' way. The way of the ancient kings is the sages' creation—it is not a natural way. It is the way of governing the people and bringing peace and stability to the kingdom under heaven. As such it has its concrete form—the rites, music, penal laws and the administrative systems (*li le xing zheng/reigakukeisei* 礼楽刑政), which the ancient kings founded. By following the way, the people are brought to their proper virtues (*de/toku* 徳). By gaining their proper virtues the people find their place within society. The societal whole is in turn ordered and made peaceful.

The way is the way of the early kings—but while the kings are many, the way is always one. Sorai struggles to provide a proper explanation as to how the one way functions through a myriad of different cultural expressions; and also how the way is adapted through time. There seems to be no better way for him to try to square a variety of traditions with the one true ordering activity of the way than to assert the extraordinary intelligence of the sage kings and its wide-ranging influence. The ancient sages are used as a societal/historical myth—to bridge the gap between the activities of heaven and human society, while at the same time providing an explanation for the value of particular cultural expressions over others.

Sorai's concept of the way of the ancient kings places the way firmly within a certain historical and cultural context—but the way also possesses universal aspects: namely, its ordering activity. By connecting the origin of the way with the concept of the patterns of heaven—which the sages alone could understand and convey—Sorai sets reverence (*jing/kei* 敬) for heaven (*tian/ten* 天) and faith (*shin* 信) in the ancient sages (*sheng/sei* 聖) as the foundations of learning.

This article tries to examine some of the reasoning for, as well as the implications of, such a conceptualization of "learning", for both the system of social organization that is proposed as well as Sorai's own project of elucidating the way.

1 *Distinguishing the Way.*

2 *Distinguishing Names.*

## The Way of the Ancient Kings

Sorai's interpretation of classical Confucian concepts is characterized by a sharp move away from discussions of personal self-cultivation and in the direction of the social and political. Sorai's work itself can in a way be considered political in ambition, though it is first and foremost educational in nature.

To demonstrate the deeper ideological and political aspects of Sorai's concept of "learning", it is necessary to first explore its proposed subject, methods and goals. Sorai sets these out in a simple and precise manner, as follows:

"Learning" refers to studying the way of the ancient kings. The ancient kings' way is contained within the *Book of Poetry*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Book of Music*. The method of learning should consist of studying what is in the *Books of Poetry, History, Rites, and Music*, and that is all. These subjects are the "four teachings" or "four arts"<sup>3</sup>. The *Book of Poetry* and the *Book of History* are repositories of ritual principle, the *Book of Rites* and the *Book of Music* set out the models for virtue<sup>4</sup>. Virtue refers to that by which the self is established; ritual principle refers to what is followed in governing. Studying the *Book of Poems*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Rites*, and the *Book of Music* is sufficient for educating scholar-knights.<sup>5</sup>

Possessing extraordinary virtue and intelligence, through which they were able to follow heaven's decree (*tian ming/tenmei* 天命), the ancient sages established the way, which the princes study and the people follow (Ogyū 1974, 219). The act of founding the way is in fact what defines sages as sages—no one can reproduce their work and no amount of learning can make the people of today into sages (ibid., 216). Rather, the goals of education encompass developing the talents and virtues needed to follow the way that the sages have already set out.

Studying the way of the ancient kings consists of following what the ancient kings established, but according to Sorai this itself has now become one of the central problems, because the sages' way, as a living transformational force, has been

3 Sorai here quotes from: Liji, Wangzhi.

4 Sorai here quotes from: Chunqiu Zuozhuan, Xi gong ershiqi nian.

5 学者。謂学先王之道也。先王之道。在詩書礼樂。故学之方。亦学詩書礼樂而已矣。是謂之四教。又謂之四術。詩書者義之府也。礼樂者德之則也。德者所以立己也。義者所以從政也。故詩書礼樂。足以造士。(Ogyū 1974, 249; Ogyū 2006, 312) In rendering various parts of the *Bendō* and the *Benmei* into English, I lean heavily on the English translations by John Allen Tucker in Ogyū, 2006. To not burden the text with marking how the translations differ, I provide page references to Tucker's original translation).

completely depleted since even the time of Confucius. Confucius—who according to Sorai was himself born in the wrong age to be a proper founder—nevertheless helped convey the proper teachings through editing the six classics (Ogyū 1974, 217). The six classics then came to represent the sole repositories of the way of the ancient kings. Unfortunately, in time even the proper understanding of ancient words and phrases became lost, and wrong interpretations of the texts thus came to prevail (ibid., 209–210).

Being a creation of the sages is a key aspect of the way: “The way of the ancient kings consists in what the ancient kings formulated. It is not the natural way of heaven and earth.”<sup>6</sup>

With the way being a creation, the ultimate standard (*ji/kyoku* 極)—the fundamental standard of what is proper and good—is also wholly defined by the ancient kings (ibid., 248). Sorai explicitly discards the cosmo-ontological discussions of his predecessors, and sets the ancient sages as the sole originators of not only a common system of values and meaning represented in the way, but also as the originators of the only possibility of a common standard, and therefore of any common system of value and meaning as such. Sorai does not believe people can live outside such a system. Through his conceptualization of the heart-mind, he identifies the people’s need for a life within a community—a fundamental natural tendency of the people. While they can differ from one another greatly and are basically prone to disordered lives, the people are fundamentally communal:

While natural tendencies of people do differ from person to person, regardless of an individual’s knowledge or ignorance, worthiness or unworthiness, all are the same in having heart-minds that mutually love, nourish, assist, and perfect one another. People are alike in their capacity to work together and undertake tasks cooperatively. Thus for government, we depend on the ruler; for nourishment, we depend on the people. Farmers, artisans, and merchants all make a living for themselves by relying upon each other. One cannot forsake society and live alone in a deserted land: these are simply people’s natural tendencies.<sup>7</sup>

People’s natural tendencies are turned towards communal life and cooperation—but they are at the same time disordered and without proper standards and therefore need to be directed along the way of the ancient kings—ordered, so that

6 先王之道。先王所造也。非天地自然之道也。(Ogyū 1974, 201; Ogyū 2006, 142).

7 人性雖殊乎。然無知愚賢不肖。皆有相愛相養相輔相成之心。運用當為之才者一矣。故資治於君。資養於民。農工商賈。皆相資為生。不能去其群獨立於無人之鄉者。唯人之性為然。(Ogyū 1974, 213; Ogyū 2006, 187)

society can be ordered in turn. The way of the ancient kings brings the people to their proper virtues and in this manner orders and defines society as a whole. The way encompasses the proper practices and institutions established by the early kings; while virtues represent what people each gain by following the way according to their natural tendencies (*xing/sei* 性), talents and abilities (Ogyū 1974, 212).

The way of the ancient kings possesses an explicit purpose. Sorai writes: “The way of the ancient kings is the way that provides for the peace of the kingdom under heaven.”<sup>8</sup>

Because the way has been lost as a concrete system of common practices, which once held the living transformational and ordering powers of the sages’ own virtues, and because even the ancient words and phrases are now misunderstood and wilfully reinterpreted, the project of distinguishing names must be undertaken—one with a special emphasis on the proper philological study of ancient words and phrases (*kobunjigaku* 古文辞学) (ibid., 251). This becomes Sorai’s central project.

Everyone can follow the way, but understanding it is extremely rare (ibid., 215)—people may thus only follow it according to their capabilities. Knowledge of the way comes from the proper practice of the rites, which happens through a process of internalization. This is also what “investigating things” (*gewu/kakubutsu* 格物) means to Sorai (ibid., 250). By understanding the names of ‘the concrete’, the people can practice the way and develop virtues—which then further strengthen the way. Sorai claims the way to be a “universal way” (ibid., 212)—and thus there are not different ways for rulers and the ruled—but it is also quite clear that the concept of education for Sorai is a multi-tiered process: one which is not the same for those who rule and those who are ruled.

Possessing concrete form, the way is further placed within a definite historical and cultural context:

The way is a comprehensive name. It refers to everything that the ancient kings established, especially the rites, music, penal laws and administrative institutions. The way embraces and designates them all. There is not something called the “the way” apart from their rites, music, penal laws, and administrative systems of government.<sup>9</sup>

The way of the ancient kings is a comprehensive term which combines different aspects of a well-ordered society: the legal, political and cultural. The penal laws and

8 先王之道。安天下之道也。(Ogyū 1974, 200; Ogyū 2006, 139)

9 道者統名也。舉礼樂刑政凡先王所建者。合而命之也。非離礼樂刑政別有所謂道者也。(Ogyū 1974, 201; Ogyū 2006, 140)

the administrative system are both part of the way, but in the *Bendō* and the *Benmei* Sorai does not put much emphasis on them. More than once he emphasizes that even though they represent the legal and the political aspects of the way, they are not enough to bring about a well-ordered society of peace and stability—and neither is learning through language alone (Ogyū 1974, 219). The way can only be actualized through rites and music, which represent its concrete cultural substance.

Unfortunately, Sorai never properly problematizes his own concepts, and in the *Bendō* and *Benmei* remains rather vague about the related rites and music as such. He states that the way is one of bringing peace and stability to the kingdom under heaven—but he never questions what such a peace would actually entail. A generous reading of his views therefore offers a system in which people each find their place within the common way according to their abilities and natural tendencies. A less generous reading offers a well-argued excuse for a system of strict social hierarchy in a deeply unequal society not unlike the Tokugawa shogunate of the time<sup>10</sup>.

## Culture as the Concrete Form of the Way

The way of the ancient kings was created by the sages and encompasses the rites, music, penal laws and administrative systems that they founded. The sages established these by properly naming “the concrete”, and thus enabling the people to follow and finally comprehend the correct practices:

Since humanity was born into the world<sup>11</sup>, where there has been the concrete, there have been names<sup>12</sup>. Of names, from the start it was the case that ordinary people coined some of them. Yet these were only names given to the concrete having form. When it came to the concrete having no form, because ordinary people could not discern it, the sages established names for it. Thereafter even ordinary people could perceive and comprehend it.<sup>13</sup>

Having set the ultimate standard (*ji/kyoku*), the sages created the way for people to be brought together from a separate standardless existence and guided to surpass their natural tendencies through being ordered according to the way. The names are

10 Anachronistic as such criticisms might seem.

11 Sorai quotes from: Mengzi, Liang Huiwang xia.

12 Sorai quotes from: Shijing, Sheng Min.

13 自生民以来、有物有名。名故有常人名焉者。是名於物之有形焉者已。至於物之亡形焉者。則常人之所不能睹者。而聖人立焉名焉。然常人後雖常人可見而識之也。(Ogyū 1974, 209; Ogyū 2006, 171).

therefore to be understood for what the sages put into them—for Sorai they must not be wilfully interpreted (Ogyū 1974, 209–10) or the way cannot be recovered.

To further emphasize that the ancient kings' way follows no natural law, but establishes the only proper laws for itself, Sorai maintains that the sages did not pattern their way on any structural principles, and thus the way cannot be known through any study of these.

Structural principles are what all affairs and things naturally have. In using our minds to figure matters, in some [courses of action] we see how to do what we must and should do, and how to do what we necessarily should not do. Such calculations involve structural principles. Whoever wants to do good indeed will see the structural principles for what they should do and will do it. Whoever wants to do evil also will see the structural principles for what they should do and will do it. In either case, out heart-minds see what should be done and we do it. Thus structural principles offer no fixed standards.<sup>14</sup>

To Sorai, the structural principles—in offering a way for both the good and the bad, whichever a person sets their intention to—can offer no fixed standards for the proper practice of the people, and thus no true foundations for the way. Sorai even claims that though the sages understood the structural principles perfectly, they still did not base their way on them (*ibid.*, 245). The structural principles are therefore not something which needs to be studied, nor something which can even be understood in a manner that would benefit either those learning or the way itself.

In the same sense Sorai denies that rightness (*yi/gi* 義) is among the virtues (*ibid.*, 221), the people can attain. For him rightness, as part of the way of the ancient kings, is strictly the rightness of the rituals, as prescribed by the sages—rather, a set of 'ritual principles'. Value and meaning of any kind cannot be found in what things possess naturally, nor do virtues themselves originate from people's natural tendencies or their heart-minds (*xin/shin* 心). The only common systems of value and meaning, which can actually thrive in peace and stability, derive from the way of the ancient kings, and only in relation to such systems can we further speak of virtues.

People usually understand that the rites are those founded by the ancient kings, but do not realize that the principles of rightness are the ritual principles of these rites. Because of this, none of their interpretations of

14 理者。事物皆自然有之。以我信心推度之。而有見其心当若是心不可若是。是謂之理。凡人欲為善。亦見其理之可為而為之。欲為惡。亦見其理之可為而為之。皆我心見其可為而為也。故理者無定準者也。(Ogyū 1974, 244; Ogyū 2006, 295).



rightness make sense. Now, rightness is best understood as part of the way. The myriad differences and the myriad distinctions within the rites each have their rightful place. Therefore, it is said, “Rightness is what is right”<sup>15 16</sup>.

Sorai considers ancient debates about people’s natural tendencies (*xing/sei*)—whether they are inherently good or not—to be unproductive (Ogyū 1974, 204). Rightness, which gives the basis for standardized value and meaning, is not something which is internal to people—it belongs to the rites of the way. Therefore what is proper and right is measured against the way of the ancient kings. When people follow the way, they gain their respective virtues—virtues are thus what is gained by the proper directing of people’s natural tendencies along the way, and what determines each person’s contributions to it. People differ in their natural tendencies, and so they also differ in the virtues they are able to complete (*ibid.*).

Sorai in some ways recognizes that any cultural expression is built on the foundations of history, and also that the way of the ancient kings cannot be reduced to either the wholly universal or the wholly particular. On the one hand the way is seen as something concrete and particular, and on the other as possessing universal ordering powers.

Bitō Masahide remarks on this in a concise fashion:

In the section on the Way in Bemmei, we are told the Way is universal, but that certain of its aspects change from age to age, and why this is something only the sages know. [Sorai] is suggesting here that when the Way is altered to meet the conditions of each age, only its phenomenological aspect changes, not its essential substance. In his description, the Way actually exists as real social institutions—as ritual, music, punishments, and governing—so it is natural for the Way to change as the world moves from one age, and from the institutions a sage created to meet its needs, to another. The sages, however, are plural, while the Way, as Sorai describes it, is presumably singular. Nowhere is there even the slightest hint that there are a variety of Ways. Rather, he notes repeatedly, as he does in the section on learning in the Bemmei, that the Way is always the same, past and present (Bitō 1978, 154–5).

The way draws its essential substance from its ordering power and purpose, since it is the way which provides for peace and stability for the kingdom under heaven.

15 Sorai quotes from: *Liji*, Zhongyong.

16 人多知礼為先王之礼。而不知義亦為先王之義。故其解皆不通矣。蓋義者道之分也。千差万别。各有所宜。故曰義者宜也。(Ogyū 1974, 220; Ogyū 2006, 210–1).



Such a purpose then also becomes the central measure of the proper way—the proper way is such that it brings peace and stability. How the different cultural expressions of the way would exist and have this universal effect, and how even then there can be no such way except that of the ancient kings, Sorai remains vague<sup>17</sup>. In the same manner, he does not provide any clear means of adapting the way to the present time. As the system was set out by the sages—who were people of the most extraordinary intelligence—it cannot be adapted in any meaningful way without the hand of another sage, whose coming remains a mystery.

This then leaves Sorai with the task of trying to explain why the ancient Chinese kings' way is the one way to bring peace to all under heaven—a task which many Edo period scholars tried their hand at through many different approaches<sup>18</sup>. Sorai's own approach is not to try and overwrite the Chinese cultural specifics of the way, like some other scholars of the period, but rather to claim that while the way does indeed come from the ancient kings of China, their influence was far reaching and left its mark on ancient Japan as well. Some of the traces of the way, which may have already been lost in contemporary China, might therefore have been better preserved in Japan<sup>19</sup>.

This of course does not solve the stated problem in any meaningful way, and only seems to produce further ideological burdens. In the end Sorai turns to a different solution—one that is very well described by Kate Wildman Nakai:

Might not one conclude that the Tokugawa thinkers considered here, faced with a set of contradictions that offered no ready prospect of dialectical resolution, chose both consciously and unconsciously to deal with them as such, to regard the world as a series of fractured truths, each absolute only within its own sphere? To live it was necessary to make a commitment, take a stance; as Sorai says, to make up one's mind on the basis of faith. But it was also necessary simultaneously to recognize, on another level, that there are no true absolutes, only a contradictory multiplicity of apparent ones (Wildman Nakai 1980, 198–9).

Sorai sets faith in the sages as the foundation of learning, and while this offers a certain powerful insight into the nature of any common system of value and meaning—that in some ways it is always based on an implicit faith in the value

17 Sorai goes only as far as to say neither the east nor the west ever produced sages—only the Middle Kingdom. (Ogyū 1974, 256)

18 For a study of this, see Wildman Nakai 1980.

19 Ibid. It is also notable that the reason given is that Japan does not possess such original thinkers as China, and thus the way would have been left in its primitive (and proper) state in the former.

of participation—it also brings with it certain ideological and political considerations, which should be further explored.

## Faith in the Sages and the Reverence of Heaven

“Learning” means studying the ancient kings’ way, and adhering to their standards. There is no natural law on which the way is based—yet to affirm that the way of the sages and it alone possesses not only its unique common-value-and-meaning giving space, but also its proper ordering powers, Sorai does assert that the authority of the sages comes from the special relationship they had with heaven.

Culture (*bun*) is the reason that the way acquired a form and name. Now, what is in the heavens, the sages called patterns (*bun*). What is in the earth was called structural principle. The great origin of the way emerged from heaven. Indeed, the ancient sage kings of antiquity founded the way by modelling it on heaven. For this reason, they provided the way with form as brilliant rites and music. Thus these are referred to as culture.<sup>20</sup>

Sorai conceptualizes heaven as the origin of all ordering activity, and connects it closely with the concept of the Lord on High (*di/tei* 帝)—the concept of both the absolute ancestral presence and the absolute ruler. Sorai describes the relationship between the sages and heaven both in its epistemological and religious dimensions—the sages possessed both special insight into heaven’s decree as well as perfect reverence of heaven itself. In this sense, their work was unique: they named the formless, overcame the standardless and brought to the people the cultural essence of the way, through which they may complete their proper virtues. And in this light, Sorai’s insistence that the work of the sages cannot be reproduced can also perhaps be understood better.

Furthermore, Sorai’s concept of heaven possesses yet another key characteristic—being fundamentally unfathomable.

Heaven cannot be fathomed. For this reason the ancient classics state, “Heaven’s decree is not constant” and “The decree is not constant”. The ancient sages perfectly worshiped, revered, and stood in awe of it without

20 文者。所以狀道而命之也。蓋在天曰文。在地曰理。道之大原出於天。古先聖王法以立道。故其為狀也禮樂粲然。是之謂文。(Ogyū 1974, 151; Ogyū 2006, 322)

cease. In doing so, they expressed the utmost reverence in relation to it. They did this precisely because they were not able to fathom heaven.<sup>21</sup>

Heaven being unfathomable, even the sages themselves could not understand it in an exhaustive way—they could only appreciate and revere it. Possessing perfect virtue, they were able to model themselves on heaven's activity—to model their ordering activity on the ordering activity of heaven. Heaven's activity is itself not based on law, but is instead the activity of an absolute ruler. Rather than being understood, heaven is to be revered: the first ritual principle of the way itself becomes the reverence of the unknowable, whose activity is only ever properly appreciated in following the way. As the sages have brought forth value and meaning through revering the unfathomable, such value and meaning can, with the sages gone, now only be reproduced through proper reverence. The sages represent a looming historical/societal myth, but one that in Sorai's formulation actually loses most of its living dimensions, although very much present in classical Confucianism.

Here Sorai, who supposedly values rites and music above legal and administrative systems, in fact comes across as possibly manipulative in a way that classical Confucianism was not. Bitō Masahide offers a pointed critique on this point:

There is no question that the idea of instructing the people by means of “ritual” or “ritual and music” occurs in classical Confucianism. Instruction by ritual though usually refers to ritual's encouraging a moral awareness in men. It does not mean that ritual is to be used to induce men, through manipulation of their collective mentality, to act in a specific manner. (Bitō 1978, 158)

The sages stand as the brilliant forefathers, who could name the formless and make comprehensible what the people could otherwise not comprehend, but the sages-as-intermediaries, being gone from the world, now also turn into a barrier between contemporary people and heaven's activity itself. The sages' way is the proper way for rulers to model themselves after, and the only way for the people to be brought to their proper virtues. The ultimate standards belong to the special relationship sages had with heaven—one, which can now no longer be replicated in its epistemological dimensions, but only in its religious ones.

This of course also carries with it certain political implications. The sages are not only people of a special higher intelligence, they are as a rule also the leaders of antiquity—and as such are the models for the rulers of today. Their way is the way,

21 蓋天者也。不可得而測焉者也。故曰天命靡常。惟命不于常。古之聖人。欽崇敬畏之弗遑。若是其至焉者。以其不可而測故也。(Ogyū 1974, 235; Ogyū 2006, 264)

which defines the ultimate standard. When the ruler and the ruled both work in service of the way, there can be no real questioning of a ruler's authority without also questioning the way and the sages. Because the origin of a ruler's authority is unfathomable and unassailable—the ruler being the one who is carrying out the rites of the way—a person would have to be a sage to actually question the ruler. The practical implications of this are that the ruler rules (with reverence) and the people follow (with reverence). Learning is no longer a noble path of rising above one's station in life—it is a way to properly conform.

It is thus no coincidence that Sorai's own project in some ways falls victim to his concepts. The strict adherence to the scriptural integrity of the ancient classics as the sole repositories of the way of the ancient kings brings with it an unpleasant undercurrent in Sorai's work, which John Allen Tucker describes as authoritarian:

Sorai's reconceptualization [...] was based upon his presumed insights into the nature of meaning, and was meant to achieve nothing less than the recovery of the way and, thereby, realization of the grounds for possibility of a peaceful and stable, well-ordered realm in which all could achieve their innate capacities. While the latter was an undeniably humanitarian ambition, Sorai's system of meaning announced in the *Bendō* and *Benmei* was also intensely authoritarian, adamantly turning against the semantically liberal and innovative tendencies that had earlier developed in association with the genre [of philosophical lexicography]. (Ogyū 2006, 15)

## Conclusion

Sorai sets faith in the sages as the foundation of learning. While this seems to solve certain of his ideological problems, it at the same time produces implications which reverberate throughout his whole system, coming at the end to dominate even his own project of semantic research. While Sorai's project is most definitely a work of seminal importance—one, which offers a powerful insight into the ways societies are constructed on ideological foundations—it cannot escape the impression that in important ways it ultimately reveals just as much by what it manages to say as by what it fails to say.

And while at first glance Sorai's teachings bring forth a humanitarian project of reclaiming the way of the ancient kings and bringing peace and stability to the realm under heaven, a study of some of his concepts—with knowledge and learning chief among them—can also paint a different picture: of a somewhat

dishonest epistemological doctrine, which yet again reinforces the parts of the Confucian legacy which most aim to uphold the deep inequalities of its patriarchal hierarchies.

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